

## **Beyond light and darkness**

On the first day of creation, God created light, and saw that it was good. He divided the light from the darkness, and he called the light 'day' and the darkness 'night.' In paradise, humans were not yet able to tell good apart from evil, but as soon as Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, they realized that if light is good, and the opposite of light is darkness, then darkness is evil. The descendants of Adam and Eve repeated these formulas throughout the night, while staring at the fire, generation upon generation.

The Greeks told a different story about light and darkness. Before there were gods, there was Chaos. From Chaos came Earth, the Underworld and Eros. Chaos produced Darkness and Night, brother and sister – the second generation. Darkness and Night made love, and their incest produced Day – for the first time in the history of the cosmos, there was light. The laws of genetics were the same as they are today: Day resembled both her father and mother, a perfect mixture of Darkness and Night, just like her siblings, Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dream, Disgrace and Misery.

In Greek mythology, light is not the enemy, but the offspring of Darkness. Darkness sends light into the world to multiply itself. Light is darkness in motion. When Prometheus stole the fire of the gods, he brought suffering to mankind. That was no coincidence: he who brings light, also brings destruction and darkness. From the eye of Medusa (a distant cousin of Day) the darkest light spreads: anyone who looks into this light is petrified. But if that light returns from whence it came – if Medusa catches the reflection of her own eyes – nothing but darkness remains. Light is darkness in motion: when it is brought to a standstill, only darkness remains.

We are caught between the God of Eden and the gods of Hesiod. Even at night we tell ourselves that light is good and darkness bad, but we are also aware that light and darkness are not enemies – they work together. Darkness only becomes visible in the presence of light: it can only be seen if there is contrast, and therefore shadow. Rembrandt and Caravaggio, as painters of darkness, were also painters of light. Their technique is chiaroscuro, the amplification of contrast between dark and light.

A successful chiaroscuro is not just a contrast, but a delicate balance between light and dark – not a fifty-fifty split, but a subtle interplay that allows the darks to be truly dark, and the lights truly light. In a failed chiaroscuro, one of these factors overshadows the other: too much light, and the darkness is lost, and with that, light itself; too much darkness, and the light disappears, and with that, darkness itself. In the works of Malevich, we no longer speak of 'light' and 'darkness', but only of colors: white, black, red. This is not simply due to their abstraction. Mark Rothko, for instance, created a number of successful chiaroscuros with abstract shapes. It is due to Malevich' lack of compromise: his lighter and darker colors remain two separate worlds, precluding true light and dark. In Rothko's works, there is communication between them; light emerges from darkness and vice versa. Malevich follows Genesis; Rothko follows Hesiod.

In chiaroscuro too, light is darkness in motion: an excess of darkness means a lack of movement; an excess of light means a lack of tranquility. At its edges, this spectrum folds back to the other side: pure darkness is the same as pure light. Is there a difference between finding oneself in complete darkness and being blinded by pure, bright light? In reality, the choice between light and darkness is not a matter of either/or; our entire world is chiaroscuro.

Light emitted by screens that enters our eyes all day long disturbs our circadian rhythm; images of light, emitted by black screens in dark living rooms, form the chiaroscuro of everyday life. In 1967, French philosopher Guy Debord declared us 'the society of the spectacle.' This essentially means that the chiaroscuro of our world has tipped the scale to the side of light: our society has been unbalanced by an excess of visibility, by an emphasis on image, by a fascination with visuals and neon lights. Here, the mythology works against us: 'And God saw the light, and it was good' (Genesis 1:4) offers no support for a humanity that feels unhinged by the constant bombardment of light.

Beyond light and darkness also means beyond good and evil. A child burning ants with a magnifying glass. The light flash of a bombing at an Afghan wedding. The red laser on a sniper rifle. The bright flashes of scandal-seeking paparazzi. Even the spectacle of a nuclear explosion is not only a chiaroscuro of blinding light and darkening clouds, but also a moral chiaroscuro: a terrible destruction one cannot look away from. Despite our conviction that light is good and darkness evil, in reality light is often a gray area, where good and evil meet, get muddled, and reinforce one another.

The single-minded association of light and good, and dark and evil – our Biblical legacy – was secularized in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. It was no longer God separating light from dark and seeing that it was good, but human reason. Progress is light, inertia is darkness; technology is light, physical labor is darkness; Europe is light, savagery is darkness. This appears to be a new mythology, but is in fact the same concept that has held mankind in its grip since Genesis: light is good, darkness is evil, and the two are strictly separated.

Those who really want to create a new mythology of light and darkness, should look beyond the Bible – back to Hesiod, for instance. The works of certain artists and philosophers offer a glimpse of this new mythology. So far they are just side views, pencil sketches and draft drawings, but they suggest the possibility of another world, where darkness is no more threatening than fire, where enlightenment means both progress and destruction, where light is the daughter of darkness – a world of chiaroscuro.

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